### Format/Explanation

1. Students should read the interview/article “Reading - Critical IR Theory and the SCS.pdf”. We will read chunks of it individually and then discuss as a group. See the “Problem-Solving vs. Critical Theory” heading below when we discuss critical theory.

2. Each student should identify something they are passionate about and then attempt to locate a scholarly publication that applies critical theory to it. As an example, students should begin by reading the “Reading - People's History of Baseball Preface.pdf”. We will discuss this brief article before giving students time to locate one of their own. Once students have located articles, we will share and discuss some of them with the group.

### Problem-Solving vs. Critical Theory

#### A simplified distinction between problem-solving theory and critical theory.

Brown 2 — M. Anne Brown, Post-Doctoral Fellow at the University of Queensland, 2002 (“Human Rights Promotion and the ‘Foreign Analogy’,” *Human Rights and the Borders of Suffering: the Promotion of Human Rights in International Politics*, Published by Manchester University Press, ISBN 0719061059, p. 18)

Robert Cox draws a distinction between critical theory and ‘problem-solving’ theory, which ‘takes the world as it finds it’ and sets out to make already given relationships and institutions ‘work smoothly by dealing effectively with particular sources of trouble’. By contrast, critical theory ‘is directed towards an appraisal of the very framework of action… which problem-solving theory accepts as its parameters’ (1981: 128f.).

#### A more comprehensive distinction between problem-solving theory and critical theory and a defense of the policy relevance of critical theory.

Cox 81 — Robert W. Cox, Professor of Political Science at York University (Canada), 1981 (“Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory,” Originally Published in *Millennium* (10:2), Republished in *A Reader in international relations and political theory*, Edited by Howard L. Williams, Published by UBC Press, ISBN 0774804394, p. 277-279)

Beginning with its problematic, theory can serve two distinct purposes. One is a simple, direct response: to be a guide to help solve the problems posed within the terms of the particular perspective which was the point of departure. The other is more reflective upon the process of theorising itself: to become clearly aware of the perspective which gives rise to theorising, and its relation to other perspectives (to achieve a perspective on perspectives); and to open up the possibility of choosing a different valid perspective from which the problematic becomes one of creating an alternative world. Each of these purposes gives rise to a different kind of theory.

The first purpose gives rise to problem-solving theory. It takes the world as it finds it, with the prevailing social and power relationships and the institutions into which they are organized, as the given framework for action. The general aim of problem-solving is to make these relationships and institutions work smoothly by dealing effectively with particular sources of trouble. Since the general pattern of institutions and relationships is not called into question, particular problems can be considered in relation to the specialised areas of activity in which they arise. Problem-solving theories are thus fragmented among a multiplicity of spheres or aspects of action, each of which assumes a certain stability in the other spheres (which enables them in practice to be ignored) when confronting a problem arising within its own. The strength of the problem-solving approach lies in its ability to fix limits or parameters to a problem area and to reduce the statement of a particular to a limited number of variables which are amenable to relatively close and precise examination. The ceteris paribus assumption, upon which such theorising is based, makes it possible to arrive at statements of laws or regularities which appear to have general validity but which imply, of course, the institutional and relational parameters assumed in the problem-solving approach.

The second purpose leads to critical theory. It is critical in the sense that it [end page 277] stands apart from the prevailing order of the world and asks how that order came about. Critical theory, unlike problem-solving theory, does not take institutions and social and power relations for granted but calls them into question by concerning itself with their origins and how and whether they might be in the process of changing. It is directed towards an appraisal of the very framework for action, or problematic, which problem-solving theory accepts as its parameters. Critical theory is directed to the social and political complex as a whole rather than to the separate parts. As a matter of practice, critical theory, like problem-solving theory, takes as its starting point some aspect or particular sphere of human activity. But whereas the problem-solving approach leads to further analytical sub-division and limitation of the issue to be dealt with, the critical approach leads towards the construction of a larger picture of the whole of which the initially contemplated part is just one component, and seeks to understand the processes of change in which both parts and whole are involved.

Critical theory is a theory of history in the sense of being concerned not just with the past but with a continuing process of historical change. Problem-solving theory is non-historical or ahistorical, since it, in effect, posits a continuing present (the permanence of the institutions and power relations which constitute its parameters). The strength of the one is the weakness of the other. Because it deals with a changing reality, critical theory must continually adjust its concepts to the changing object it seeks to understand and explain. 5 These concepts and the accompanying methods of enquiry seem to lack the precision that can be achieved by problem-solving theory, which posits a fixed order as its point of reference. This relative strength of problem-solving theory, however, rests upon a false premise, since the social and political order is not fixed but (at least in a long-range perspective) is changing. Moreover, the assumption of fixity is not merely a convenience of method, but also an ideological bias. Problem-solving theories can be represented, in the broader perspective of critical theory, as serving particular national, sectional, or class interests, which are comfortable within the given order. Indeed, the purpose served by problem-solving theory is conservative, since it aims to solve the problems arising in various parts of a complex whole in order to smooth the functioning of the whole. This aim rather belies the frequent claim of problem-solving theory to be value-free. It is methodologically value-free insofar as it treats the variables it considers as objects (as the chemist treats molecules or the physicist forces and motion); but it is value-bound by virtue of the fact that it implicitly accepts the prevailing order as its own framework. Critical theory contains problem-solving theories within itself, but contains them in the form of identifiable ideologies, thereby pointing to their conservative consequences, not to their usefulness as guides to action. Problem-solving theory tends to ignore this kind of critique as being irrelevant to its purposes and in any case, as not detracting from its practical applicability. Problem-solving theory stakes its claims on its greater precision and, to the extent that it recognises critical theory at all, challenges the possibility of achieving any scientific knowledge of historical processes.

Critical theory is, of course, not unconcerned with the problems of the real [end page 278] world. Its aims are just as practical as those of problem-solving theory, but it approaches practice from a perspective which transcends that of the existing order, which problem-solving theory takes as its starting point. Critical theory allows for a normative choice in favor of a social and political order different from the prevailing order, but it limits the range of choice to alternative orders which are feasible transformations of the existing world. A principle objective of critical theory, therefore, is to clarify this range of possible alternatives. Critical theory thus contains an element of utopianism in the sense that it can represent a coherent picture of an alternative order, but its utopianism is constrained by its comprehension of historical processes. It must reject improbable alternatives just as it rejects the permanency of the existing order. In this way critical theory can be a guide to strategic action for bringing about an alternative order, whereas problem-solving theory is a guide to tactical actions which, intended or unintended, sustain the existing order.

#### A defense of problem-solving theory (vs. critical theory).

Jarvis 2k — Darryl S. L. Jarvis, Director of the Research Institute for International Risk and Lecturer in International Relations at the University of Sydney, 2000 (*International Relations and the Challenge of Postmodernism: Defending the Discipline*, Published by the University of South Carolina Press, ISBN 1570033056, p. 128-129)

Perhaps more alarming though is the outright violence Ashley recommends in response to what at best seem trite, if not imagined, injustices. Inculpating modernity, positivism, technical rationality, or realism with violence, racism, war, and countless other crimes not only smacks of anthropomorphism but, as demonstrated by Ashley’s torturous prose and reasoning, requires a dubious logic to make such connections in the first place. Are we really to believe that ethereal entities like positivism, modernism, or realism emanate a “violence” that marginalizes dissidents? Indeed, where is this violence, repression, and marginalization? As self-professed dissidents supposedly exiled from the discipline, Ashley and Walker appear remarkably well integrated into the academy—vocal, published, and at the center of the Third Debate and the forefront of theoretical research. Likewise, is Ashley seriously suggesting that, on the basis of this largely imagined violence, global transformation (perhaps even revolutionary violence) is a necessary, let alone desirable, response? Has the rationale for emancipation or the fight for justice been reduced to such vacuous revolutionary slogans as “Down with positivism and rationality”? The point is surely trite. Apart from members of the academy, who has heard of positivism and who for a moment imagines that they need to be emancipated from it, or from modernity, rationality, or realism for that matter? In an era of unprecedented change and turmoil, of new political and military configurations, of war in the Balkans and ethnic cleansing, is Ashley really suggesting that some of the greatest threats facing humankind or some of the great moments of history rest on such innocuous and largely unknown nonrealities like positivism and realism? These are imagined and fictitious enemies, theoretical fabrications that represent arcane, self-serving debates superfluous to the lives of most people and, arguably, to most issues of importance in international relations.

More is the pity that such irrational and obviously abstruse debate should so occupy us at a time of great global turmoil. That it does and continues to do so reflects our lack of judicious criteria for evaluating theory and, more importantly, the lack of attachment theorists have to the real world. Certainly it is right and proper that we ponder the depths of our theoretical imaginations, engage in epistemological and ontological debate, and analyze the sociology of our knowledge.37 But to suppose that [end page 128] this is the only risk of international theory, let alone the most important one, smacks of intellectual elitism and displays a certain contempt for those who search for guidance in their daily struggles as actors in international politics. What does Ashley’s project, his deconstructive efforts, or valiant fight against positivism say to the truly marginalized, oppressed, and destitute! How does it help solve the plight of the poor, the displaced refugees, the casualties of war, or the emigres of death squads? Does it in any way speak to those whose actions and thoughts comprise the policy and practice of international relations?

On all these questions one must answer no. This is not to say, of course, that all theory should be judged by its technical rationality and problem-solving capacity as Ashley forcefully argues. But to suppose that problem-solving technical theory is not necessary—or is in some way bad—is a contemptuous position that abrogates any hope of solving some of the nightmarish realities that millions confront daily. As Holsti argues, we need ask of these theorists and their theories the ultimate question, “So what!” To what purpose do they deconstruct, problematize, destabilize, undermine, ridicule, and belittle modernist and rationalist approaches? Does this get us any further, make the world any better, or enhance the human condition? In what sense can this “debate toward [a] bottomless pit of epistemology and metaphysics” be judged pertinent, relevant, helpful, or cogent to anyone other than those foolish enough to be scholastically excited by abstract and recondite debate.38

Contrary to Ashley’s assertions, then, a poststructural approach fails to empower the marginalized and, in fact, abandons them. Rather than analyze the political economy of power, wealth, oppression, production, or international relations and render an intelligible understanding of these processes, Ashley succeeds in ostracizing those he portends to represent by delivering an obscure and highly convoluted discourse. If Ashley wishes to chastise structural realism for its abstractness and detachment, he must be prepared also to face similar criticism, especially when he so adamantly intends his work to address the real life plight of those who struggle at marginal places.